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Review/Reseña

Nancy Grey Postero, *Now We Are Citizens: Indigenous Politics in Postmulticultural Bolivia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

After Neoliberalism and Multiculturalism in Bolivia

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As many in the United States continue to celebrate or simply contemplate the presidential election that marks a key moment in the racial history of the country, it is worth noting that while the election of Barack Obama is of course an important event, in the broader hemispheric and historical context, the U.S. is in many ways finally catching up with its neighbors to the south. Despite the much repeated claim (often made by the winning candidate himself) that in no other country is the Obama story even remotely possible, the reality is that similar stories about marginalized

peoples rising to presidential heights have been part of Latin American politics for quite some time. While there are clear differences and complexities in the forces that produced electoral victories for Benito Juárez in the nineteenth century, Alberto Fujimori and Hugo Chávez in the twentieth, and Alejandro Toledo and Evo Morales in the twenty-first, Latin Americans were far ahead of North Americans in marching past the color line, at least on the way to the presidential palace.¹ The most recent of these elections, the 2005 victory in Bolivia of Evo Morales, is perhaps the most dramatic in the Americas, as it marks the first time that a self-identified indigenous person was elected president in that indigenous-majority country, making the most comparable victory not Obama's, but rather Nelson Mandela's.

While the rise of Evo Morales has received great attention from journalists and academics across the world, there is an important need to situate this particular indigenous story in the context of a broader national one. Indeed, Morales' victory marked not only an important racial shift, but also a dramatic politico-ideological one, as the 54 percent majority victory gave his left-leaning *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) control of a state that had previously been in the hands of Washington-consensus neoliberal policymakers. In understanding how Bolivia went from the darling of the International Monetary Fund to a key member of the "left turn" in Latin America, scholars are fortunate to have works like Nancy Postero's *Now We are Citizens*. Along with other recent works on popular politics in the Andes,² Postero has written a terrific book on the cultural politics of contemporary Bolivian society.

Postero's book is both panoramic and focused in its examinations of the last decade or so of Bolivian cultural politics. On a broad scale she surveys particular meanings and consequences of social "wars" and upheavals since 2000, leading to the election of the first indigenous president. On a more local level, she provides an ethnographic exploration

¹ Gender lines were also crossed in Latin American presidencies. Unlike in the U.S., women have served (or are serving) as president in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Guyana, Nicaragua, and Panama.

² High quality recent works on this transition in Bolivia include Gustafson (forthcoming), Himpele (2007), Hylton and Thomson (2007), and Kohl and Farthing (2006).

of the ways national legal and economic changes affected life in a Guaraní community in lowland Santa Cruz. It is worth examining each level of her book in turn.

National Dynamics

On the broadest level, Postero offers an important assessment of the impact of the promises and consequences of the so-called neoliberal multicultural moment in Bolivia, noting the importance of the state-led reforms of the 1990s. The reforms, and particularly the Law of Popular Participation (LPP) to which she devotes special attention, were hyped by the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada as offering the promise of social inclusion even as economic policies continued to favor privatizations and neoliberal reforms that hit the poorest sectors of society the hardest. Postero adds to the chorus of critical academic literature on the LPP noting that its “biggest effect was to strengthen traditional political parties and elites that control them” (142). Dissatisfaction with the economic model and with political reforms created the conditions for the rise of Morales and his MAS party. In a dialectical way, then, the contradictions of neoliberal multiculturalism produced a new moment, one that she calls “post-multicultural.”

Postero repeatedly notes that she is writing against the grain of most representations of Bolivia in the international media. These representations explained the recent water wars (2000) and gas wars (2003) in the country as indigenous uprisings, mobilizations of indigenous people who were fed up with neoliberalism. Postero rejects these explanations and argues instead that these social upheavals are in fact the illustration of a new “post-multicultural” moment in Bolivia where demands are made not on the basis of race or class, but rather on behalf of Bolivian citizens. According to Postero, this represents a “strikingly new social formation by which the protesters made objections on behalf of the Bolivian people” (4).

Postero is certainly right to emphasize the remarkable rupture that Bolivia has experienced. Her discussion of the re-articulation of class, ethnic, and national projects is also valuable and often insightful. Certainly

the current moment is one where, as Jeff Himpele (2007) has written, the popular has been indigenized and indigeneity has been popularized. Yet, there are places in the text where Postero seems to express her claims in a language that is perhaps more sweeping than it should be. I am not sure if it is wise to claim that it is only recently that Bolivians “have *begun* to integrate ethnic difference with issues of class, citizenship, race, and democracy” (5, emphasis added). If anything, this is a very old Bolivian and even Andean process. Indeed, if there is one over-arching argument in Sinclair Thomson’s (2003) excellent book on the eighteenth century uprisings of Túpac Katari and Túpac Amaru (which Postero cites early in her book) it is that these late colonial uprisings were motivated by local, communal understandings of non-liberal forms of democracy and an understanding of Andean citizenship in which *kurakas* had responsibilities to their communities. Thomson convincingly argues that a key catalyst for Andean uprisings was provided by *kurakas* who “rebelled against” local communities and did the bidding of the colonial state. From that eighteenth century moment on, as Thomson and Forrest Hylton (2007) note in their co-authored book on revolution in Bolivia, there have been several moments in which indigenous people were part of efforts to refashion popular struggles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Expanding the frame a bit more regionally, this is also a familiar story in neighboring Ecuador as indigenous struggles there have rarely been simply ethnic affairs.³ Postero certainly knows all this, so she could have been a bit more careful in her characterization of the particular articulations of the present rather than over-emphasizing the novelty of the moment.

Neoliberalism and Multiculturalism in the Lowlands

Postero’s ethnographic strengths are on display in her insightful account of life in a Guaraní community she calls “Bella Flor.” Unlike many scholarly works on Bolivia that emphasize the Andean face of the country, Postero’s ethnography is focused on the lowlands. Though the lowlands are

³ For an insightful comparison of Ecuador and Bolivia see Lucero (2008). Becker (2008) provides a fascinating account of the synthesis of class and ethnicity in popular politics in the 1940s in Ecuador. If Becker is right, Ecuador’s pre-multicultural moment is strikingly similar in content to Postero’s post-multicultural one.

not as densely populated as the highlands, they are more ethnically diverse. They are also the sites of much of the extractive industry in the region. Through Postero's historically informed ethnography, readers will learn much about the impacts of legal and economic forces from her discussion of how leaders and residents of Bella Flor navigated the change that came in the wake of popular participation and other neoliberal multicultural reforms. Though these reforms provided new opportunities for resource allocation and political inclusion, they also created new and significant tensions within the community over land tenure and political representation.

Moreover, it is in these discussions (and especially in chapters four and five) that readers get the best window into the contradictions of neoliberal multiculturalism. Postero's account of the ways in which the state, NGOs, and indigenous leaders were all at work in forging new technologies of citizenship is especially valuable as we see how the post-multicultural forms of citizenship often took shape in spite and not because of the agents of the "pluri-multi" agenda of the 1990s. Postero is also very good at showing the complexity of local indigenous life. Far from romanticizing communities, she provides a detailed and complex portrait of both solidarity and conflict at local levels. Additionally, with the backdrop of the changing national "rules of the game" Postero is able to illustrate why and how local people respond to the opportunities and limitations of neoliberal multiculturalism.

If I have a complaint about these rich and rewarding ethnographic chapters, it is that I would have liked to hear more of the voices that informed Postero's insightful discussion of the lowlands. Perhaps more striking an omission is the lack of the elite voices from Santa Cruz that have become increasingly vocal since the election of Evo Morales. Though Postero notes the importance of "white," traditional elites in the lowlands, we are left wondering how these elites used the "postmulticultural" moment to forge their own projects of identity. The "nación camba" and their armed wing of youth gangs are among the most notorious cases of the backlash to Morales' victory, but it is striking how lowland elites have borrowed from the repertoire of indigenous movements to express their

own calls for autonomy and even democracy against what they see as the “totalitarian” government of Morales. Many of these calls are ridiculous on their face, but there is no doubt that with millions of people taking to public spaces in cities like Santa Cruz there is an important popular dimension to the idea of non-indigenous lowland regionalism. It is something of a missed opportunity that these voices do not form part of Postero’s lowland ethnography.

Contradictions of Post-Multiculturalism?

Postero’s ethnography captures the gap between the promises and consequences of the LPP and other reforms for indigenous people in lowland Santa Cruz. She details Guaraní frustrations with the “pluri-multi” reforms, and particularly with the unfulfilled promises of the decentralization of political and economic power. But she also shows how the Guaraní’s engagement with the LPP, and with the idea of indigenous citizenship were significant components of this new postmulticultural citizenship. As she states:

[T]he LPP acted to recontextualize existing hierarchies of exclusion in new 'multicultural' forms. Yet precisely because of these effects, which rendered visible the continuing exclusions, the reforms also had significant positive impact. By engaging with neoliberal state institutions that promised to include them and finding them wanting, citizens began to push to make those institutions more inclusive. (225)

As Postero argues, the reforms of the 1990s and the promises made by the state set the stage for the upheavals of the 21st century. But indigenous peoples responded to these reforms in part by using the language of citizenship that had been provided by the neoliberal multicultural state. For Postero, this language of citizenship, of postmulticultural citizenship, is what marks this “new” moment: “Today’s poor and indigenous Bolivian public demands a democratic government designed by the people themselves, which will go beyond the limited notions of citizenship found in neoliberal multiculturalism” (225).

Postero is certainly right that the current postmulticultural moment is layered with complexity and new possibility. But might her understandable optimism about postmulticultural citizenship obscure

some of the tensions and dangers of the current moment? I would like to conclude with some thoughts on this, which add yet another layer of complexity. During an early 2007 visit to Bolivia, I learned about a major shake up in the president's cabinet. Felix Patzi, the Minister of Education, an outspoken and "radical" Aymara sociologist, was sacked by the president. While this is not the place to discuss all the reasons for Patzi's removal, it is crucial to note that his replacement, Victor Cáceres, did not come from the world of indigenous movements and intellectuals, but rather from the urban teachers' union, a powerful part of Evo's constituency. This new minister and the union he represents had never been friendly to the project of indigenous bilingual intercultural education, seeing it as a part of the neoliberal baggage of previous presidents. This move accompanied other education initiatives, like literacy programs run by Cuban and Venezuelan educators. These programs may have a strong popular and leftist component, but they leave behind any discussion of cultural difference and colonial legacies. As for the numerous indigenous professionals who were at the ministry working for Patzi, as often happens, they too found themselves out of work. One Aymara professional who herself was a fierce critic of the neoliberal multicultural reforms, could not help but see the removal of an indigenous education minister as a step backward. Almost not believing her own words, she declared "things were better for us [indigenous people] with the neoliberals. Who would have thought *they* would be more open?"

The question that this raises is one about the meaning of this post-multicultural moment. Rather than a smooth synthesis of class and ethnic components, there will be moments when certain choices will alienate some part of President Morales' broad popular coalition. In the process of choosing delegates to the Constituent Assembly, Morales angered indigenous leaders who favored using their own communal selection procedures to pick representatives rather than using the individualist and liberal logic of elections. Even in one of Morales' first major policy decision, which eliminated the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs (in January 2006), the contradictions of the postmulticultural moment are evident. On the one hand, there is the argument that indigenous affairs should no longer be

isolated and ghettoized in one single corner of the government. On the other, the technical implication of this move is that there is less capacity for the formulation and implementation of programs for indigenous people when an entire ministry is eliminated. While many of these kinds of tensions have emerged only after Nancy Postero completed her research, given the complexities of the prior regimes of citizenship, she might have had more to say about what challenges the era of postmulticulturalism might bring.

For instance, Postero could have offered an exploration of the tensions that were present in the very persona of Evo Morales, an Aymara migrant who became politically active in class-based unions. While Morales may seem like the embodiment of the postmulticultural moment that Postero discusses, depending on whom one speaks to, he is either too indigenous (especially as seen from Santa Cruz) or he is not indigenous enough (as many leaders of the *ayllu* movement have expressed quite vocally). Thus, it should not be surprising that the tenure of Evo Morales as president has been characterized by almost constant conflict and contention rather than any kind of social peace. Postmulticulturalism, then, seems to be as much about things falling apart as it is about things coming together.

To predict the future may be asking too much of any book however, and Postero has certainly produced a first-rate account of an important chapter of Bolivian history. Though there are some points of emphasis and interpretation that will be subject to debate, this book will be of great value to graduate and advanced undergraduate courses that seek to understand official multiculturalisms and its discontents.

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